



## CATHEDRAL

Siena Cathedral, dedicated to Our Lady of the Assumption, rises in the middle of Piazza del Duomo with its extraordinary polychrome marble façade. The white and dark green bands along the sides synthesize the interest in color and line typical of the Gothic style in Siena, here visible in its most complex and meaningful expression. The façade was begun by Nicola Pisano and developed by his son, before being finished under the direction of Lorenzo Maitani. Its reliefs, niches, spires and columns make this cathedral the most significant monumental expression of the period of greatest artistic and cultural fervor in the entire history of Siennese civilization.

Besides the magnificence of its exterior, the Cathedral is distinguished by the evocative, sumptuous decoration of the interior, where all the branches of the figurative arts are sublimely represented. Nicola Pisano, Duccio di Buoninsegna, Antonio Federighi, Donatello, Pinturicchio, Domenico Beccafumi, Michelangelo, and Bernini are just a few of the artists who worked in the Cathedral, giving evidence of the fertility of the art of decoration in Siena, revealed in all its grandeur in the cathedral.

But what makes Siena Cathedral even more unusual is the unusual, magnificent decoration of the inlaid marble floor.

The decoration of the floor was initiated in the fourteenth century (the oldest parts date to 1369) by anonymous artists and was finished only in the nineteenth century, using designs prepared by painters trained at Siena's Istituto di Belle Arti. The preparatory cartoons for the fifty-six scenes were made by numerous artists, all trained in Siena (including Sassetta, Domenico di Bartolo, Matteo di Giovanni, Francesco di Giorgio Martini, and Domenico Beccafumi), except for the inlay of the Allegory of the Hill of Knowledge, designed by the Umbrian painter Bernardino di Betto, known as Pinturicchio, between 1505 and 1506. The technique utilized for the floor is marble inlay and graffito. The first designs were quite simple, but progressively reached an astonishing level of virtuosity, to the point that the later sections, with their numerous nuances of color, almost seem painted. The first inlays were sketched onto slabs of white marble with grooves made using a chisel and drill, which were then filled in with black stucco. This technique is called "graffito." Later, a technique was developed of placing shaped pieces of colored marble next to each other as in a wooden intarsia. Subsequently, artists combined the two techniques. Domenico Beccafumi, a Siennese mannerist painter active in the first half of the sixteenth century, perfected this technique even further, working with marble to achieve highly evocative effects of chiaroscuro painting.